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Chandian Science Hunter

## WHAT KHOMEINI WANTS FROM US

By William R. Brown

The experience of our government in attempting to free the US hostages in Iran has been characterized alternatively by false hope and dejection — bewilderment over the course of events. America's problem is that developments have consistently fallen outside its political frame of reference.

Our first failure is our refusal to recognize that the sole purpose of Ayatollah Khomeini is to assure the acceptance of his moral authority. He is not concerned with our idea of a government's working for the general welfare as measured by material or economic improvement. For the ayatollah, a condition of physical well-being can only result from his actual being undisputed. Because Khomeini sees himself as God's spokesman, it is only after the sway of his moral influence is established that God (and not the government) will provide sustenance to the Iranian people. Until that time, chaos will prevail — and is acceptable.

The only occasion on which the Iranian government really stirs itself, in fact, is when an ethnic or political group challenges Khomeini's authority. The frustration of Bani-Sadr, and perhaps even Gholbzadeh, results from their acceptance of Western values. They think about government as we do. Khomeini probably understands the distinction, and it is doubtful whether he feels any affinity for his lieutenants or for what they would like to achieve; i.e., the removal of the hostage issue so that Iran can get on with the business of reviving the economy and establishing the government's "effectiveness."

The militants in the embassy, on the other hand, rest their entire position on righteousness as pronounced by Khomeini. Need there be any wonder that when the ayatollah does speak, he supports the militants?

The holding of hostages is old business for those who think in traditional Middle East terms. As late as 1962, the Imam Ahmed of Yemen held the sons of tribal leaders against the good behavior of the Zaidi tribes. The leaders delivered their sons voluntarily, thereby demonstrating their acceptance of his moral authority as ordained by God. The sons were well treated as evidence of the

Imam's morality and magnanimity. And so it is with Khomeini. The hostages not only assure American quiescence, but our quiescence demonstrates Khomeini's moral authority. The demand of the Iranians, first that we apologize for our support of the Shah and then that we deliver him to them for justice, has the same purpose — to show Iranian moral authority. For the Iranians, we are inferior in these terms, whatever our military might.

The matter of the Shah thereby assumes dimensions that touch issues of international power. If we comply with their demands, it will appear that Khomeini has compelled us to do so. At this moment, their power will be clearly superior to our own. Herein lies an element of the hostage crisis that is important to the Iranians.

Under these circumstances, a cleverly worded response by Carter expressing US "concern" — or even, "regret" — for returning the Shah to power in 1953 will not move Khomeini unless Carter's statement also records the moral difference between the American President and the Iranian leader — and perhaps even between the American and Iranian peoples. Only if Carter can devise some other way of satisfying the Iranian sense of moral superiority will the hostages be freed and the United States allowed to end its humiliation.

We are also disturbed by what we consider Iranian deception in permitting us to believe that a UN investigation of the Shah's crimes would lead possibly to a release of the hostages and, if not that, then to their transfer to government or neutral authority. At least the UN commission would be allowed to interview all hostages as a first step in the process.

None of these things happened. But, in Iranian terms, it is legitimate to proceed with mental reservations when dealing with an enemy of superior physical force. If the commission reports publicly on the Shah's atrocities, Khomeini will have moved a step closer to establishing his moral authority. The ayatollah and his ministers consider it justifiable to hint that all will be well if only the commission publishes its report, or perhaps just returns to Iran for further consultations. And so the game proceeds.

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All the while, the situation works on the minds of the American President and his public, playing on their anxieties to move them closer to uttering those incantations of guilt that will supposedly free the hostages. For many Iranians, this flow of events reveals America's moral weakness and shows that we stand not just against the ayatollah but also against God.

Finally, there is the prospect of the Iranian Parliament freeing the hostages after it is elected in April. Here we encounter Khomeini's escape-valve. Traditional Islamic communities, such as Khomeini believes he is fashioning, operated on the basis of consensus rather than through a plurality of mutually adjusting interests. In traditional Islam a parliament (majlis) was not for purposes of representation. Rather, it embodied a popular consensus which itself was inspired by God.

If Khomeini freed the hostages on his own authority, his opponents in Iran could charge that he had moved against God's will and as an impostor had deceived the people only to work his evil ways. But the same change cannot be made against the voice of community consensus. Khomeini will have no trouble accepting the Parliament's judgment, whatever it may be. But it would be a mistake for us to assume that the Parliament will free the hostages. Nevertheless, the next move of the Iranians will probably be to get the US to respond to this hope.

If the American public has a difficult time coming to terms with this type of thinking, American officials have even greater difficulty. It is not that no one in the Department of State understands these things. Many do. It is just that our leaders cannot respond to such an explanation. It lies outside the politics they practice. Even for a State Department expert to present these ideas belittles the authority of the American President to deal effectively

with a complex situation.

The problem is that explanations strung out along the lines of Khomeini's quest for undisputed moral authority can only help Carter avoid mistakes. They do not tell him clearly what he can do within the limits of the bureaucratic perception that he and his advisers are accustomed to using. Thus, our leaders cling to the slim margin of rationality that they see in Bani-Sadr. He talks in ways they understand, and they accept his statements even though these convey messages that are alien to the forces that currently control the situation in Iran.

In US government circles, for some reason, there is embarrassment over suggesting that our policies are tied to someone's idea of God. Officials would rather use the conventional Western ways of thinking about the Middle East — the possibility of exploiting competition between Bani-Sadr and Gholbzadeh or of revealing to the Iranian people the real purpose of the militants — godless leftists who want to overthrow Khomeini and deliver Iran to the Soviets. It gives those who prepare and read White House briefing papers a sense of control and an authority of their own.

For the present, this approach is of little significance. The hostage crisis serves Khomeini's purpose and he is making the situation as difficult for President Carter as possible. The issue before Carter is not how to free the hostages. Rather it is whether, in terms of his political future, saving the hostages is compatible with a minimal sense of American national dignity.

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